

OP-EDS



'Enforcement only' is an incomplete solution

By Rep. David Price (D-N.C.)

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Like so many meritorious bipartisan initiatives in this Congress, comprehensive immigration reform fell victim to a Republican Senate filibuster last spring. The most pragmatic plan we have yet seen to close the gap between official immigration policy and the demands of our labor market collapsed.

It was falsely labeled an “amnesty” program and became the punching bag of fear-peddlers on talk radio and the extreme right.

I have disagreed with most major policy proposals put forward by the Bush administration, but I think the president’s effort to enact comprehensive immigration reform was absolutely on target. It was a reasoned policy approach that recognized the scope of the problem, and I wish he had applied this style of policymaking to other areas.

To be sure, there were legitimate reservations about the federal government’s ability to implement some aspects of the Senate legislation. The alternative, however, is to continue the current piecemeal efforts to enforce the current unworkable law, which increasingly has states and local communities taking matters into their own hands. Since becoming House Homeland Security Appropriations Subcommittee chairman last year, I have twice taken our subcommittee to the southern border. I have yet to hear from a Border Patrol agent that enforcement only offers a solution.

For those who insist on enforcement first, I can only say that much has already been accomplished in this area and more is on the way. The 110th Congress has made remarkable strides, going beyond the president’s funding requests and putting sensible priorities in place, both for border personnel and infrastructure and for interior enforcement.

The fiscal 2008 omnibus appropriations bill (P.L. 110-161) provided funding for an additional 3,000 Border Patrol agents, a nearly 100 percent increase since early 2001. The bill also provided \$1.6 billion, \$323 million above the president’s request, for infrastructure and technology on our borders, including pedestrian fencing, vehicle barriers, and enhanced surveillance technology to gain control of the border. And we wrote strong oversight and reporting provisions into the bill to ensure that our border security solutions are effective and that they minimize negative effects on local communities and their economies.

We also took a fresh look at the Department of Homeland Security’s priorities in enforcing immigration law. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has significantly stepped up its worksite enforcement efforts over the last year, and we have all read stories about families being torn apart and young children being separated from their mothers as a consequence. At the same time, ICE had made only modest efforts to address a population of illegal immigrants that are known to pose a threat to our communities — those serving time in our penal institutions for committing serious crimes.

Between 2005 and 2007, according to ICE’s own figures, deportations of non-criminals increased by 59 percent while deportations of criminal aliens only rose by 7 percent. The agency has further estimated that there are more than 600,000 incarcerated illegal aliens currently serving time in our prisons, many of whom are simply being released in the United States after completing their sentences.

At my direction, the omnibus bill provided \$200 million for ICE to work with each federal, state, and local prison in the United States to identify every incarcerated illegal alien subject to deportation, with a goal of deporting all such individuals after they have served their jail time.

Deporting illegal aliens who have been convicted of criminal offenses should be ICE’s top priority.

Overall, the omnibus bill provided \$4.7 billion for ICE, \$770 million above the 2007 funding level and \$567 million above the president’s request. This includes funding for 32,000 detention beds, 4,500 more than in 2007, to ensure that DHS is able to continue its “catch and return” deportation policy.

In the end, our ability to cut the Gordian Knot of illegal immigration through congressional appropriations is very

limited. Sooner or later, we must enact a comprehensive, pragmatic program that attacks all aspects of the problem. Why? Because the only way to effectively concentrate on the greatest threats at our borders is to establish the means to match carefully vetted immigrant workers with the jobs in the United States that cannot be filled locally. By taking illegal laborers out of the border security equation with sensible worker programs, the Border Patrol can focus its resources on drug smugglers, terrorist infiltrators, and other serious threats.

We must combine worker programs, based on the legitimate needs of employers, with a path to legal residency for lawabiding immigrants, serious enforcement of employment laws, and the protection of our borders. Only in this way can we truly address the interconnected and complicated challenges of immigration in America.

Price is chairman of the House Homeland Security Appropriations Subcommittee.

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